

Chapter Twelve: The Lord of Death

Masouda ran forward and prostrated herself at full length, but Godwin and Wulf stared at the heap, and the heap stared at them. Then, at some motion of his chin, Masouda arose and said:

"Strangers, you stand in the presence of the Master, Sinan, Lord of Death. Kneel, and do homage to the Master."

But the brethren stiffened their backs and would not kneel. They lifted their hands to their brows in salute, but no more.

Then from between the black turban and the black cloak came a hollow voice, speaking in Arabic, and saying:

"Are these the men who brought me the lion's skin? Well, what seek ye, Franks?" They stood silent.

"Dread lord," said Masouda, "these knights are but now come from England over sea, and do not understand our tongue."

"Set out their story and their request," said Al-je-bal, "that we may judge of them."

"Dread lord," answered Masouda, "as I sent you word, they say that they are the kin of a certain knight who in battle saved

the life of him who ruled before you, but is now an inhabitant of Paradise."

"I have heard that there was such a knight," said the voice. "He was named D'Arcy, and he bore the same cognizance on his shield--the sign of a skull."

"Lord, these brethren are also named D'Arcy, and now they come to ask your help against Salah-ed-din."

At that name the heap stirred as a snake stirs when it hears danger, and the head erected itself a little beneath the great turban.

"What help, and why?" asked the voice.

"Lord, Salah-ed-din has stolen a woman of their house who is his niece, and these knights, her brothers, ask you to aid them to recover her."

The beady eyes instantly became interested.

"Report has been made to me of that story," said the voice; "but what sign do these Franks show? He who went before me gave a ring, and with it certain rights in this land, to the knight D'Arcy who befriended him in danger. Where is that sacred ring,

with which he parted in his foolishness?"

Masouda translated, and seeing the warning in her eyes and remembering her words, the brethren shook their heads, while Wulf answered:

"Our uncle, the knight Sir Andrew, was cut down by the soldiers of Salah-ed-din, and as he died bade us seek you out. What time had he to tell us of any ring?"

The head sank upon the breast.

"I hoped," said Sinan to Masouda, "that they had the ring, and it was for this reason, woman, that I allowed you to lead these knights hither, after you had reported of them and their quest to me from Beirut. It is not well that there should be two holy Signets in the world, and he who went before me, when he lay dying, charged me to recover his if that were possible. Let them go back to their own land and return to me with the ancient ring, and I will help them."

Masouda translated the last sentence only, and again the brethren shook their heads. This time it was Godwin who spoke.

"Our land is far away, O lord, and where shall we find this long-lost ring? Let not our journey be in vain. O mighty One,

give us justice against Salah-ed-din."

"All my years have I sought justice on Salah-ed-din," answered Sinan, "and yet he prevails against me. Now I make you an offer. Go, Franks, and bring me his head, or at least put him to death as I shall show you how, and we will talk again."

When they heard this saying Wulf said to Godwin, in English:

"I think that we had best go; I do not like this company." But Godwin made no answer.

As they stood silent thus, not knowing what to say, a man entered through the door, and, throwing himself on his hands and knees, crawled towards the cushion through the double line of councillors or dais.

"Your report?" said Sinan in Arabic.

"Lord," answered the man, "I acquaint you that your will has been done in the matter of the vessel." Then he went on speaking in a low voice, so rapidly that the brethren could scarcely hear and much less understand him.

Sinan listened, then said:

"Let the fedai enter and make his own report, bringing with him his prisoners."

Now one of the dais, he who sat nearest the canopy, rose and pointing towards the brethren, said.

"Touching these Franks, what is your will?"

The beady eyes, which seemed to search out their souls, fixed themselves upon them and for a long while Sinan considered. They trembled, knowing that he was passing some judgment concerning them in his heart, and that on his next words much might hang--even their lives.

"Let them stay here," he said at length. "I may have questions to ask them."

For a time there was silence. Sinan, Lord of Death, seemed to be lost in thought under the black shade of his canopy; the double line of dais stared at nothingness across the passage way; the giant guards stood still as statues; Masouda watched the brethren from beneath her long eye-lashes, while the brethren watched the sharp edge of the shadow of the canopy on the marble floor. They strove to seem unconcerned, but their hearts were beating fast within them who felt that great things were about to happen, though what these might be they knew not.

So intense was the silence, so dreadful seemed that inhuman, snake-like man, so strange his aged, passionless councillors, and the place of council surrounded by a dizzy gulf, that fear took hold of them like the fear of an evil dream. Godwin wondered if Sinan could see the ring upon his breast, and what would happen to him if he did see it; while Wulf longed to shout aloud, to do anything that would break this deathly, sunlit quiet. To them those minutes seemed like hours; indeed, for aught they knew, they might have been hours.

At length there was a stir behind the brethren, and at a word from Masouda they separated, falling apart a pace or two, and stood opposite each other and sideways to Sinan. Standing thus, they saw the curtains drawn. Through them came four men, carrying a stretcher covered with a cloth, beneath which they could see the outline of a form, that lay there stirless. The four men brought the stretcher to the front of the canopy, set it on the ground, prostrated themselves, and retired, walking backwards down the length of the terrace.

Again there was silence, while the brethren wondered whose corpse it was that lay beneath the cloth, for a corpse it must surely be; though neither the Lord of the Mountain nor his dais and guards seemed to concern themselves in the matter. Again the curtains parted, and a procession advanced up the terrace. First

came a great man clad in a white robe blazoned with the bleeding dagger, after whom walked a tall woman shrouded in a long veil, who was followed by a thick-set knight clad in Frankish armour and wearing a cape of which the cowl covered his head as though to keep the rays of the sun from beating on his helm. Lastly walked four guards. Up the long place they marched, through the double line of dais, while with a strange stirring in their breasts the brethren watched the shape and movements of the veiled woman who stepped forward rapidly, not seeing them, for she turned her head neither to the right nor left. The leader of the little band reached the space before the canopy, and, prostrating himself by the side of the stretcher, lay still. She who walked behind him stopped also, and, seeing the black heap upon the cushion, shuddered.

"Woman, unveil," commanded the voice of Sinan.

She hesitated, then swiftly undid some fastening, so that her drapery fell from her head. The brethren stared, rubbed their eyes, and stared again.

Before them stood Rosamund!

Yes, it was Rosamund, worn with sickness, terrors, and travel, Rosamund herself beyond all doubt. At the sight of her pale, queenly beauty the heap on the cushion stirred beneath his black

cloak, and the beady eyes were filled with an evil, eager light. Even the dais seemed to wake from their contemplation, and Masouda bit her red lip, turned pale beneath her olive skin, and watched with devouring eyes, waiting to read this woman's heart.

"Rosamund!" cried the brethren with one voice.

She heard. As they sprang towards her she glanced wildly from face to face, then with a low cry flung an arm about the neck of each and would have fallen in the ecstasy of her joy had they not held her. Indeed, her knees touched the ground. As they stooped to lift her it flashed into Godwin's mind that Masouda had told Sinan that they were her brethren. The thought was followed by another. If this were so, they might be left with her, whereas otherwise that black-robed devil--

"Listen," he whispered in English; "we are not your cousins--we are your brothers, your half-brothers, and we know no Arabic."

She heard and Wulf heard, but the watchers thought that they were but welcoming each other, for Wulf began to talk also, random words in French, such as "Greeting, sister!" "Well found, sister!" and kissed her on the forehead.

Rosamund opened her eyes, which had closed, and, gaining her feet, gave one hand to each of the brethren. Then the voice of

Masouda was heard interpreting the words of Sinan.

"It seems, lady, that you know these knights."

"I do--well. They are my brothers, from whom I was stolen when they were drugged and our father was killed."

"How is that, lady, seeing that you are said to be the niece of Salah-ed-din? Are these knights, then, the nephews of Salah-ed-din?"

"Nay," answered Rosamund, "they are my father's sons, but of another wife."

The answer appeared to satisfy Sinan, who fixed his eyes upon the pale beauty of Rosamund and asked no more questions. While he remained thus thinking, a noise arose at the end of the terrace, and the brethren, turning their heads, saw that the thick-set knight was striving to thrust his way through the guards who stood by the curtains and barred his path with the shafts of their spears.

Then it came into Godwin's mind that just before Rosamund unveiled he had seen this knight suddenly turn and walk down the terrace.

The lord Sinan looked up at the sound and made a sign. Thereon two of the dais sprang to their feet and ran towards the curtain, where they spoke with the knight, who turned and came back with them, though slowly, as one who is unwilling. Now his hood had fallen from his head, and Godwin and Wulf stared at him as he advanced, for surely they knew those great shoulders, those round black eyes, those thick lips, and that heavy jowl.

"Lozelle! It is Lozelle!" said Godwin.

"Ay," echoed Rosamund, "it is Lozelle, the double traitor, who betrayed me first to the soldiers of Saladin, and, because I would have none of his love, next to this lord Sinan."

Wulf heard, and, as Lozelle drew near to them, sprang forward with an oath and struck him across the face with his mailed hand. Instantly guards thrust themselves between them, and Sinan asked through Masouda:

"Why do you dare to strike this Frank in my presence?"

"Because, lord," answered Wulf, "he is a rogue who has brought all these troubles on our house. I challenge him to meet me in battle to the death."

"And I also," said Godwin.

"I am ready," shouted Lozelle, stung to fury by the blow.

"Then, dog, why did you try to run away when you saw our faces?" asked Wulf.

Masouda held up her hand and began to interpret, addressing Lozelle, and speaking in the first person as the "mouth" of Sinan.

"I thank you for your service who have served me before. Your messenger came, a Frank whom I knew in old days. As you had arranged it should be, I sent one of my fedais with soldiers to kill the men of Salah-ed-din on the ship and capture this lady who is his niece, all of which it seems has been done. The bargain that your messenger made was that the lady should be given over to you--"

Here Godwin and Wulf ground their teeth and glared at him.

"But these knights say that you stole her, their kinswoman, from them, and one of them has struck you and challenged you to single combat, which challenge you have accepted. I sanction the combat gladly, who have long desired to see two knights of the Franks fight in tourney according to their custom. I will set the course, and you shall be given the best horse in my kingdom; this

knight shall ride his own. These are the conditions--the course shall be on the bridge between the inner and outer gates of the castle city, and the fight, which must be to the death, shall take place on the night of the full moon--that is, three days from now. If you are victor, we will talk of the matter of the lady for whom you bargained as a wife."

"My lord, my lord," answered Lozelle, "who can lay a lance on that terrible place in moonlight? Is it thus that you keep faith with me?"

"I can and will!" cried Wulf. "Dog, I would fight you in the gates of hell, with my soul on the hazard."

"Keep faith with yourself," said Sinan, "who said that you accepted the challenge of this knight and made no conditions, and when you have proved upon his body that his quarrel is not just, then speak of my faith with you. Nay, no more words; when this fight is done we will speak again, and not before. Let him be led to the outer castle and there given of our best. Let my great black horse be brought to him that he may gallop it to and fro upon the bridge, or where he will within the circuit of the walls, by day or by night; but see that he has no speech with this lady whom he has betrayed into my power, or with these knights his foes, nor suffer him to come into my presence. I will not talk with a man who has been struck in the face until he has

washed away the blow in blood."

As Masouda finished translating, and before Lozelle could answer, the lord Sinan moved his head, whereon guards sprang forward and conducted Lozelle from the terrace.

"Farewell, Sir Thief," cried Wulf after him, "till we meet again upon the narrow bridge and there settle our account. You have fought Godwin, perhaps you will have better luck with Wulf."

Lozelle glared back at him, and, finding no answer, went on his way.

"Your report," said Sinan, addressing the tall fedai who all this while had lain upon his face before him, still as the form that was stretched upon the bier. "There should have been another prisoner, the great emir Hassan. Also, where is the Frankish spy?"

The fedai rose and spoke.

"Lord," he said, "I did your bidding. The knight who has gone steered the ship into the bay, as had been arranged. I attacked with the daylight. The soldiers of Salah-ed-din fought bravely, for the lady here saw us, and gave them time to gather, and we lost many men. We overcame and killed them all, except the prince

Hassan, whom we took prisoner. I left some men to watch the ship. The crew we spared, as they were the servants of the Frank Lozelle, setting them loose upon the beach, together with a Frankish woman, who was the servant of the lady here, to find their way to the nearest city. This woman I would have killed, but the lady your captive begged for her life, saying she had come from the land of the Franks to seek her husband; so, having no orders, let her go. Yesterday morning we started for Masyaf, the prince Hassan riding in a litter together with that Frankish spy who was here a while ago, and told you of the coming of the ship. At night they slept in the same tent; I left the prince bound and set a guard, but in the morning when we looked we found him gone--how, I know not--and lying in the tent the Frankish spy, dead, with a knife-wound through his heart. Behold!" and withdrawing the cloth from the stretcher he revealed the stiff form of the spy Nicholas, who lay there dead, a look of terror frozen on his face.

"At least this one has come to an end he deserved," muttered Wulf to Godwin.

"So, having searched without avail, I came on here with the lady your prisoner and the Frank Lozelle. I have spoken."

Now when he had heard this report, forgetting his calm, Sinan arose from the cushion and stepped forward two paces. There he

halted, with fury in his glittering eyes, looking like a man clothed in a black bell. For a moment he stroked his beard, and the brethren noted that on the first finger of his right hand was a ring so like to that which hung about the neck of Godwin that none could have told them apart.

"Man," Sinan said in a low voice, "what have you done? You have left the emir Hassan go, who is the most trusted friend and general of the Sultan of Damascus. By now he is there, or near it, and within six days we shall see the army of Salah-ed-din riding across the plain. Also you have not killed the crew and the Frankish woman, and they too will make report of the taking of the ship and the capture of this lady, who is of the house of Salah-ed-din and whom he seeks more earnestly than all the kingdom of the Franks. What have you to say?"

"Lord," answered the tall fedai, and his hand trembled as he spoke, "most mighty lord, I had no orders as to the killing of the crew from your lips, and the Frank Lozelle told me that he had agreed with you that they should be spared."

"Then, slave, he lied. He agreed with me through that dead spy that they should be slain, and do you not know that if I give no orders in such a case I mean death, not life? But what of the prince Hassan?"

"Lord, I have nothing to say. I think he must have bribed the spy named Nicholas"--and he pointed to the corpse--"to cut his bonds, and afterwards killed the man for vengeance sake, for by the body we found a heavy purse of gold. That he hated him as he hated yonder Lozelle I know, for he called them dogs and traitors in the boat; and since he could not strike them, his hands being bound, he spat in their faces, cursing them in the name of Allah. That is why, Lozelle being afraid to be near him, I set the spy Nicholas, who was a bold fellow, as a watch over him, and two soldiers outside the tent, while Lozelle and I watched the lady."

"Let those soldiers be brought," said Sinan, "and tell their story."

They were brought and stood by their captain, but they had no story to tell. They swore that they had not slept on guard, nor heard a sound, yet when morning came the prince was gone. Again the Lord of Death stroked his black beard. Then he held up the Signet before the eyes of the three men, saying:

"You see the token. Go."

"Lord," said the fedai, "I have served you well for many years."

"Your service is ended. Go!" was the stern answer.

The fedai bowed his head in salute, stood for a moment as though lost in thought, then, turning suddenly, walked with a steady step to the edge of the abyss and leapt. For an instant the sunlight shone on his white and fluttering robe, then from the depths of that darksome place floated up the sound of a heavy fall, and all was still.

"Follow your captain to Paradise," said Sinan to the two soldiers, whereon one of them drew a knife to stab himself, but a dai sprang up, saying:

"Beast, would you shed blood before your lord? Do you not know the custom? Begone!"

So the poor men went, the first with a steady step, and the second, who was not so brave, reeling over the edge of the precipice as one might who is drunken.

"It is finished," said the dais, clapping their hands gently.

"Dread lord, we thank thee for thy justice."

But Rosamund turned sick and faint, and even the brethren paled.

This man was terrible indeed--if he were a man and not a devil--and they were in his power. How long would it be, they wondered, before they also were bidden to walk that gulf? Only Wulf swore in his heart that if he went by this road Sinan should

go with him.

Then the corpse of the false palmer was borne away to be thrown to the eagles which always hovered over that house of death, and Sinan, having reseated himself upon the cushion, began to talk again through his "mouth" Masouda, in a low, quiet voice, as though nothing had happened to anger him.

"Lady," he said to Rosamund, "your story is known to me. Salah-ed-din seeks you, nor is it wonderful"--here his eyes glittered with a new and horrible light--"that he should desire to see such loveliness at his court, although the Frank Lozelle swore through yonder dead spy that you are precious in his eyes because of some vision that has come to him. Well, this heretic sultan is my enemy whom Satan protects, for even my fedais have failed to kill him, and perhaps there will be war on account of you. But have no fear, for the price at which you shall be delivered to him is higher than Salah-ed-din himself would care to pay, even for you. So, since this castle is impregnable, here you may dwell at peace, nor shall any desire be denied you. Speak, and your wishes are fulfilled."

"I desire," said Rosamund in a low, steady voice, "protection against Sir Hugh Lozelle and all men."

"It is yours. The Lord of the Mountain covers you with his own

mantle."

"I desire," she went on, "that my brothers here may lodge with me, that I may not feel alone among strange people."

He thought awhile, and answered:

"Your brethren shall lodge near you in the guest castle. Why not, since from them you cannot need protection? They shall meet you at the feast and in the garden. But, lady, do you know it? They came here upon faith of some old tale of a promise made by him who went before me to ask my help to recover you from Salah-ed-din, unwitting that I was your host, not Salah-ed-din. That they should meet you thus is a chance which makes even my wisdom wonder, for in it I see omens. Now she whom they wished to rescue from Salah-ed-din, these tall brethren of yours might wish to rescue from Al-je-bal. Understand then, all of you, that from the Lord of Death there is but one escape. Yonder runs its path," and he pointed to the dizzy place whence his three servants had leapt to their doom.

"Knights," he went on, addressing Godwin and Wulf, "lead your sister hence. This evening I bid her, and you to my banquet. Till then, farewell. Woman," he added to Masouda, "accompany them. You know your duties; this lady is in your charge. Suffer that no strange man comes near her--above all, the Frank Lozelle. Dais

take notice and let it be proclaimed--To these three is given the protection of the Signet in all things, save that they must not leave my walls except under sanction of the Signet--nay, in its very presence."

The dais rose, bowed, and seated themselves again. Then, guided by Masouda and preceded and followed by guards, the brethren and Rosamund walked down the terrace through the curtains into the chancel-like place where men crouched upon the ground; through the great hall were more men crouched upon the ground; through the ante-chamber where, at a word from Masouda, the guards saluted; through passages to that place where they had slept. Here Masouda halted and said:

"Lady Rose of the World, who are fitly so named, I go to prepare your chamber. Doubtless you will wish to speak awhile with these your--brothers. Speak on and fear not, for it shall be my care that you are left alone, if only for a little while. Yet walls have ears, so I counsel you use that English tongue which none of us understand in the land of Al-je-bal--not even I."

Then she bowed and went.